



LANGSTON HUGHES: A PROTEST POET

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ABSTRACT

The present study makes a critical analysis of the protest poetry of Langston Hughes, one of the most demonstrative African American poets and a leader of the most important literary and political movement in America—Harlem Renaissance. The present paper mainly provides a comprehensive view on the major themes of Hughes poems and how he firmly believed in the equality of all races. As a Black poet he chose to write about the harsh realities and openly spoke about the discriminations faced by the African Americans in America.

KEYWORDS: Harlem Renaissance, African-Americans, Native-Americans, racial consciousness.

Langston Hughes was one of the most influential black writers of 1920s. He witnessed racial discrimination, segregation and prejudice, and as a literary activist he raised his voice against injustice and suppression. He longed for freedom from the shackles of prejudice and segregation to attain equality. He wrote during the time when black culture was becoming more appealing to white society through the Jazz and other music that the negroes produced. Hughes' poetry was part of the Harlem Renaissance also called 'New Negro Movement'. It is known as the re-awakening or the new awakening in the history of African-American writing. The poetry of Langston Hughes is challenging. It drives from a different tradition from most American poetry, a tradition of black culture, of jazz, and of protest. Hughes' background and personal beliefs were quite influential in his writing and it was reflected in his tremendous discontent for the 'white man's world'.

Throughout his poetry, Langston Hughes chronicled the pathetic predicament of downtrodden African Americans in America—the richest and the most powerful country of the world—and talked about the dream of freedom of African Americans. He talked about harmony and brotherhood between whites and blacks. The closer reading of Hughes' poetry reveals a feeling of hostility and mistreatment of the Negro community in America. The Negroes lived in an environment where they were subjected to tortures and torments. They lived in fear and apprehension. These people were left out and had no security of their existence being clueless about the future. Negroes constantly lived in anxiety and uncertainty, pessimism and gloom, at times placing them in severe unpleasant positions in their lives. But their collective effort to attain freedom made them reach their goal; the freedom from slavery, racism and oppression.

Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, to educated and ambitious parents. They separated while he was a child, and his father went to Mexico, where he became a successful businessman. His mother moved from job to job, and the young Hughes lived sometimes with her and sometimes with his maternal grandmother. He was a bookish child and started writing verse in grammar school. When he graduated from high school, he visited his father in Mexico. There was little sympathy between them because Hughes said his father 'had a great contempt for all poor people', holding that 'it was their own fault that they were poor'. On this trip he wrote one of his better-known poems, 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers'.

'The Negro Speaks of River' one of Hughes' most famous work, is basically a history of black society. In this poem, black society in a way, is the speaker. The speaker has however watched how slavery has taken its people out of a state of nature and held them captive. The poem opens with the words "I've known rivers" goes on to evoke the antiquity and mystique of Africa through a description of 'the Euphrates', 'the Congo', and 'the Nile'. The line: "my soul has grown deep like the rivers" links the poet to this ancient past. Hughes wrote it as he was crossing the Mississippi and he remembered how Abraham Lincoln had travelled by raft down this river to New Orleans to witness the barbarity of slavery. This is the last river of the poem.

In this poem the speaker is essentially stressing that he has seen black history from beginning to end and understands all the suffering that the black man has endured since being removed from a state of nature. Hughes uses a lot of implications throughout this poem. The most obvious example the word "muddy" which not only arouses a great deal of sensory image but also means 'black'. He represents his race with the word 'mud'. A major alteration in this poem occurs when the speaker mentions the 'raising of the pyramids', which was a slave practice of ancient Egypt. While this shows the point at which there was a major 'downfall' in

black culture, there still seems to be an optimistic tinge for the future.

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

.....

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers. (The Negro Speaks of Rivers).

In the poem 'Dream Deferred', dream is referred to as a final destination in life and not just dreams experienced during sleep. The dream is important to the dreamer's life. This poem of Hughes' begins and ends with a question. In fact, the whole poem is in the form of questions.

"what happens to a dream deferred?"

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore

And then run? (Dream Deferred)

The poem does not indicate the dream but leaves it up to the readers. However, the speaker clearly states that any important dream or goal that must be delayed can have serious negative effects. As we look at each question, we find out how those affect us. With each question the speaker offers a prospect of each negative effect. The first one "Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?": a raisin is already dry, and raisin is good as it is useful and nutritious, but if a raisin is left in the sun to dry up more than it becomes hard and impossible for one to consume as its value gets exhausted and it no longer serves its useful, nutritional purpose. In the same way suppose that person with the dream is told he cannot fulfil his goal just yet; he must wait until society changes, until institutions and laws change to allow him to become the lawyer, doctor, professor or poet that he finds his talent and desires direct him to be. What if he has no idea how long it will take? and what if he feels that perhaps in his life time that time will never come? what happens then? assuredly his talent will dry up if he is not allowed to develop it.

If the dream does not dry up like a raisin it might "fester like a sore/ And then run". That means if you have a wound (sore/ lesion), you definitely want it to dry and heal, but if it aggravates, that means that it is infected and will take longer time to heal. The dream that festers becomes infected with diseases of restlessness and discontentment that may lead to criminal activity, striking back at those who are differing the dream. If the dream is not realized timely, it may seem to decay as it dies. In the last line, "Or does it explode?" the speaker uses a metaphor of an explosion. If all the other possibilities of a deferred dream are evil with some shodder than others, than last possibility is the worst. If the person whose dream is deferred loses all hope, might 'explode' with despair. He might commit suicide, or kill someone or both are possible. This poem somewhat presents the picture of contemporary Harlem.

Protest or objection is the dominant theme of Hughes' poetry. It is expressed in varying degrees of intensity, but is always rooted in creativity. He was a writer committed to his people i.e. African Americans who suffered under segregation

and discriminatory laws. His concern for justice drove him to write in a number of genres, including poetry, short-stories, novels, plays and essays. He was among the few poets to communicate simple ideas in straightforward language that his proposed audience would understand. Therefore, Langston Hughes felt compelled to speak his mind for equality and freedom through his poetry. He clearly addresses his point of view about democracy in the first stanza of his poem 'democracy' (1949). He declares the following:

Democracy will not come
Today, this year
Nor ever
Through compromise and fear. (Democracy)

Hughes believes that his rights should be equivalent to those of white people, without compromising his self-esteem in any way. He declares he is an American and should have the rights as the native Americans. He does not want to wait for freedom; he wants to fight for freedom and make a change. Democracy indicates free and equal representation of people; in more concrete language, it implies free and equal right to every single soul to participate in a system of government, which was non-existent to blacks at the juncture. The poem 'Democracy' by Langston Hughes is one of many great poems (poetic protest) composed throughout his illustrious poetic life. In reality, democracy was profoundly one sided, as the blacks were not allowed to be involved in any decision making. Freedom and equality recapitulate the entire poem for that is what Hughes wanted at the time, basic entitlement for one and for all.

When Langston Hughes wrote the poem 'I, too sing America' (1932), African-Americans were not accepted and were discriminated, killed violently, not allowed to use the common facilities. The division between white and black was clearly prevalent with whites fearing on the better side. Fundamentally the United States of America was a discriminatory society reinforced by its racist laws. Hence Langston Hughes took the initiative to speak his mind through the medium of poetry. This poem shows blunt disrespect from the master to his servant by sending him away every time visitors come, because he is ordered to eat in the kitchen, secluded from company. However, it does not disturb him, for he finds it very funny he says, "but I laugh".

Moreover, when he is isolated in kitchen, he eats well. Not only does he find amusement but this isolation also has a positive effect on him because as he becomes stronger, verified by the line "And grow stronger". This line illustrates that even though the servant is not happy in submission, he will not allow it to kill his spirit. The central part of the poem demonstrates the strength of a black slave who stands up and says enough is enough:

"Tomorrow
I will be at the table
When company comes
Nobody'll dare
Say to me
"Eat in the kitchen"
Then (I too sing America, 1932)

This poem of Langston Hughes has a profound meaning. The poem basically stands for equality and freedom. Hughes depicts a slave who receives a horrible treatment from his masters. But he resists and asserts himself. The message of the poem is quite apparent that the African Americans ought to have the same freedom as the Native Americans. Hughes expresses his feelings by saying that blacks have equal rights too, like every white person in the world.

The nationalistic temper of the times, the sense of self-reliance, racial consciousness is all summed up in a revolutionary article entitled 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain' (1926) written by Langston Hughes. In it he asserts that,

We younger negro artist who create now intend to express are individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it does not matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too... we build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on the top of the mountain free from within ourselves'. (The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain, 1926)

The above statement was regarded as a manifesto by the writers and intellectuals of Harlem Renaissance and Hughes became a symbol of the newly awakened black consciousness.

Black experiences, hope for the future and improvement are repetitively present in Hughes' poetry. He displays this message in various ways predominantly through a mother's point of view. It is revealed in his poem 'Mother to Son' and 'The Negro Mother'. Hughes' 'Mother to Son' is entirely written from a mother's view point. The title implies that the poem is written or spoken by a mother to his

son. It's actually in the form of a dramatic monologue where a mother questions or complains about her frustration. The opening lines of the poem are:

"Well son, I'll tell you
Life for and so crystal stair
Its had tacks in it,
And splinters
And boards torn up
And places with no carpet on the floor
Bare. (Mother to Son)

In this poem the crystal stairs symbolise a materialistic life of the rich. Hughes include such realistic details to make the metaphor of a stairway literal and symbolic at the same time. Hughes includes facts that appeal to the reader's vision, hearing and touch. The mother says, "I've still climbin'", which indicates that she is a strong woman. The last few lines urge the son to keep on going, despite the obstacles in his life. The mother affirms the value of persistence and faith in one's goal. He chose a mother to advise her son because he in his own life was much closer to his mother and also because mothers usually give their sons advice about hardships in life.

Hughes' another lesser known poems "The Negro Mother also talks about the past, present and future of the black community. The negro mother is the one who works in the fields of the native Americans who mistreats them and sold their children and husband. Thus she remains faithful to her children through her hard work and her dreams for them. The Negro Mother in this poem tries to remind young black people about the suffering that their ancestry endured, instead of just advising black youths and the mother representing African-Americans as a whole. Like a critic suggested: "The Negro Mother comes to be seen not simply as an old woman talking to her children but as in some sense, the voice of African-American history itself, recounting its struggle, 'That the race might live and grow'". (Web)

"The Negro Mother" was written some years after "Mother To Son" and they have parallel themes and style. In both poems we find similar speakers in a same dramatic situation, as the title character addresses her African-American sons and daughters. Both poems mentions the "dark" and difficult 'climb up the stairs' that the mother has faced and what the children will go through. Perhaps both poems display the advice Hughes' mother must have told him because she had also lived a difficult life with constant travelling and divorces.

Hughes died in 1967, aged 65, leaving a vast collection of writings; eight collections of poetry, novels, plays, short-stories, two autobiographical works, speeches, articles and translations. His aim was to create a negro literature in which protest and self-awareness were to be combined and to be of natural benefit in creating its final strength and validity. In this poem, "Note on Commercial Theatre", he complained:

You've taken my blues and gone
You sing 'em on Broadway
And you sing 'em in Hollywood bowl,
And you mix 'em up with symphonies
And you fixed 'em
So they don't sound like me. (Note on Commercial Theatre)

He set out to change this and the end of the poem is prophetic with regard to what was to achieve and what is now happening in America.

But someday somebody'll
Stand up and talk about me,
And write about me –
Black and beautiful-
And sing about me,
And put on plays about me!
I reckon it'll be
Me, myself!
Yes, it'll be. (Note on Commercial Theatre)

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